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ABSTRACT

This study guide for Arthur Lipsett's film "Very Nice, Very Nice" is in four parts. First, it describes and evaluates the film, discusses Lipsett's unusual juxtapositions, fast cutting, and fragmented speeches as indications of his satirical intent, and suggests that the only meaningful summation of the film's content is through pattern recognition and image clusters. Second, it lists comments to the teacher, and suggests ways of approaching the teaching of the film. Third, it offers questions to stimulate general classroom discussion of the film (e.g., What images suggest violence? oddity? alienation? What use is made of advertising? What emotions did the film maker evoke? How appropriate is the term 'psychedelic' in describing the film?) And fourth, it presents three types of projects which can arise from the study of the film--i.e., writing poetry, arranging series of photographs, and using sound and film to achieve a dramatic effect. (DD)

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Screen Study Guides

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VERY NICE, VERY NICE

(Directed and edited by Arthur Lipsett

Produced for The National Film Board in 1960)

Living in an image-saturated, information-polluted culture is not easy. Bombarded by multi-sensory stimuli, we experience the total involvement in what Marshal McLuhan has termed the global village. Our environ-

ment is richly textured; its forms are constantly changing. Whether we like it or not, our values and sense perceptions are being manipulated and altered by forces beyond our control. The films of Arthur Lipsett, a film maker in his early thirties, are an artistic distillation of our chaotic urban environment, a powerful indictment of the forces of alienation and ultimately, a harsh warning to take stock of our civilization. For students, the Lipsett films become a means of probing their environment so that they can look for patterns and gain insights.

If the medium is the message, it is no where truer than in the way in which Lipsett created the film, Very Nice, Very Nice. Assembling and juxtaposing hundreds of photographs—most of them recent he looked for interesting visual accidents and then, with a degree of intellectual detachment, tried to see why it worked. The film maker has remarked: "I feel a vibration from the patterns." Perhaps a clue to the effects that the Lipsett films have on a viewer is contained in another comment: "Today our senses are much more alive. Thanks to T.V. many of us are in a kind of mass epileptic fit."

A superficial look at Lipsett's vision of the world would seem to suggest that we are in a maelstrom of our own making and that the apocalypse is just around the corner. But those who care to look carefully at his films will find moments of religious awe, visual beauty and revelations of the forces of life that offset the elements of destruction and cynicism.

To make definite statements about Lipsett's themes would be to intellectualize what is primarily an emotional, almost a psychedelic experience. Perhaps Lipsett's education in art school enabled him to declare: "The meaning is psychological like the surrealist painters who are in tune with the subconscious." The only meaningful summation of the content in *Very Nice, Very Nice* is through pattern recognition and image clusters. And depending on the experience of the individual, the real significance of the patterns will vary with each viewer. Reading a Lipsett film is comparable to experiencing a stream of consciousness poem in which our response is conditioned not by linear sequential logic but by the cumulative effect of intellectual and emotional associations. One final caveat. When interpreting the film, it is important to 1.) consider the images in juxtaposition and 2.) consider the unusual effects gained through the various sounds and the voice-over commentary.

One common patterns in the film suggests dehumanization. Many faces reveal loneliness and suffering. Several pictures show people alone on the street-dejected and forlorn—as if life were a meaningless experience. A possible explanation for the latter may be found in the various references to the search for meaning in a complex society and in the activities which

serve as a substitute for a meaningful life. For example, "I don't think there is a deep concern about anything." (A newspaper head line appears after this and states: "I was married to a call girl.")

Another comment goes; "If the only thing you can think to express your individuality is an orange plantation in Brazil . . ." (A rocket ascending is seen while we hear this comment.) Or the glib remark that is effectively satirized by the image of the atomic bomb which accompanies it. "If you feel well you know inevitably whatever is going to happen you feel well anyway."

Another pattern which helps to explain the cause of meaninglessness can be found in the references to soft sell advertising. And closely related to this an obsessive image of narcissitic sexuality. The voice over declares elliptically, "There is nothing more enjoyable. "The montage which follows includes a hair tonic ad, a woman embracing a man, an ad for facial powder, a baboon, and a picture of a body-beautiful muscle man. In another sequence a voice declares: "The more determined among us are doing something about it." The montage includes Eisenhower and Krushov, their heads whirling madly about; a girl advertising cereal, a close-up of a woman's mouth, her teeth gleaming with the Pepsodent smile; another body beautiful muscle man and picture of Marilyn Monroe.

But to repeat; our observations about content are only speculative; it is the method which is important and which contains the message. Throughout the film, it is often apparent that the intention is satiric and ironic. The unusual juxtapositions, the fast cutting, the fragmented speeches are the tools of a satirist at loose in the contemporary idiom of film.

Comments to the Teacher

1. There are many ways of introducing the film—references to the visual data conveyed by the mass media, theories of perception and psychedelia, and the stream of consciousness movement in literature. The ideal preparation would involve the students in the creation of visual montages. (See projects)
2. Marshall McLuhan's observations in *Understanding Media* on the nature of the global village as well as his theories of hot and cool media may prove useful. His first book on mass communications, *The Mechanical Bride* has some relevant points on the mosaic pattern of the newspaper.
3. Rather than implanting ideas ahead of time e.g. dehumanization, it would be more profitable to ask students to look for patterns or recurring motifs. In this way, everyone can evolve his own theory about the organizing principles of the film.

4. After the class has seen the film, they will be stirred up and possibly confused. A cooling off period is desirable and one of the best ways to insure this is to have each student write down the motifs which he noticed in the film. Students could also list the dominant emotions they felt during the film and the images which evoked them.

General Discussion

1. What emotions did the film maker evoke? Refer to specific images and words where possible.
2. Is the film only negative? What optimistic notes can you find?
3. What images suggest violence? oddity? alienation?
4. What use is made of advertising?
5. Lipsett has stated that in his films that sound is as important as the imagery. How would you validate this observation?
6. What criticism of contemporary society might be implied by the following words and images:
   a) Voice: "Almost everybody has a washing machine, a drying machine." Images: faces of women with dejected or indifferent expressions.
   b) Voice: ". . . and they say the situation is gettting worse." Images: two shots of U.S. airforce planes (obsolete?) piled on top of one another.
   c) Voice: "I don't think there is a deep concern about anything." Images: Bill boards and newspapers, one of them with a head line "I'm married to a call girl."
   d) Voice: "That's a really dangerous thing if the only thing you can think to express your individuality is an orange plantation in Brazil."
   Imagery: A rocket going through space.
   e) Voice: "People seem unwilling to become involved in anything." Images: Dead body of a soldier.
   f) In one sequence, Eisenhower and Krushov are seen in juxtaposition and then through animation techniques their heads are seen to spin around so that in partial fusion they seem to be one person. What satiric point is suggested by this technique?
8. What purpose is served by the following?
   Interviewer: What is your name, my friend?
   The person being questioned stutters and blabbers.
   Finally, his face appears expanded and then dissolves in a blur. (It is interesting to note that near the end of the film many of the faces become increasingly blurred.)

9. How appropriate is the term 'psychedelic' to describe this kind of film?
10. Many T.V. commercials, like the films of Lipsett, use fast cutting—as many as 50 cuts in a one minute commercial. How effective are these commercials in communicating their message?
11. Usually when Lipsett's films are shown, young people are sympathetic to his themes and methods, whereas the older generation are often baffled. How would you account for such a difference in response?
12. Communications expert Marshall McLuhan asserts. "Ours is a brand-new world of all at onceness. Time has ceased, space has vanished. We now live in a global village, a simultaneous happening. Electric circuitry pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men. Its message is total Change, ending psychic, social, economic and political parochialism." Show how this quotation can be applied to the content and techniques of *Very Nice, Very Nice.*
13. Other films by Arthur Lipsett are: *Free Fall, 2187, A trip down memory lane* and *Plexus.* After looking at some of these films, you might consider the following: a) recurring themes and images b) similarities and differences in film techniques.

PROJECTS

1. Write a poem in free verse in which you approximate verbally the film maker's visual effects of montage and fast cutting.
2. A class can create many of the effects of *Very Nice, Very Nice* by the compilation of photographs. Students should be encouraged to look for interesting photographs in newspapers and magazines. When a good cross section of photographs has been collected, students can start to arrange them according to effective juxtaposition. Some photographs could be put side by side for similarity or for contrast; others could be juxtaposed for the purpose of allowing one photograph to make a satiric or ironic comment on the other. For example, placing along side of a picture of the U.S. president any of the following photographs would denigrate his image quite readily: a) an H-bomb exploding b) the disconsolate look of children from the slums c) a monkey eating a banana. Different classes could try different arrangements, in each case trying to determine the emotional effects of each juxtaposition. (If a teacher has access to a set of STOP! LOOK AND WRITE (Bantam) ed. Leavitt and Sohn, a book of photographs to stimulate student writing, he can use this as a good preliminary exercise to the above assignment.)

3. There are several ways in which a class could achieve something comparable to the dramatic and disturbing effects of a Lipsett sound track. Dividing a class into groups and using records and (tapes, allow each group to make a sound track for a) a slide presentation b) a film which is projected without its sound track c) a student made film which has had a magnetic stripe added. The latter enables you to record a good sound track which is put on the magnetic stripe through a sound recording projector. Like magnetic audio-tape, the sound track can be subsequently erased. Whatever method is used, the teacher should encourage the students not only to select sounds which emphasize the mood of the image but also to try the opposite-sound effects that might be deliberately inappropriate and jarring. In this way, they will gain some insight into Lipsett's creative process. To illustrate, you could take a film such as the N.F.B.-SKY (8 min.) a visual montage of mountains, prairies, clouds and shadow effects. By adding appropriate music and commentary, you could make the imagery be more lyrical and romantic or more menacing and austere.